



**Most addiction concepts in various European countries changed between 1860 and 1980, but by the end of this period some degree of homogeneity around terminology can be observed**

**evolution  
addiction  
concept  
Europe**

Throughout history, and across Europe, an assortment of different concepts and terms were employed to describe the long-term use of illicit drugs, alcohol and tobacco. Words such as ‘inebriety’, ‘chronic alcohol poisoning’, ‘narcomania’, ‘dependence’ and ‘addiction’ were used by a variety of actors in a range of contexts to describe the problems caused by psychoactive substances. In this study, we examined addiction concepts in selected European countries (Austria, Italy, Poland and the UK and their historic boundaries and components) over the period from 1860 to 1980.

A variety of approaches to drugs, alcohol and tobacco can be found over time and place. In the period 1860-1930, alcohol was the prime concern throughout the studied countries, but by the middle of the twentieth century we start to see differences emerge. From the 1950s onwards, in Italy and Austria, drugs were of more legislative interest than alcohol, perhaps partly because of the significant domestic production and trade in wine. In Poland, alcohol was the main concern, with drugs and tobacco attracting much less attention. In the UK, all three substances prompted policy initiatives, and tobacco was of much greater concern there than in any of the other countries studied. The different substances also prompted different kinds of policies: there was considerable heterogeneity in approaches to addiction at the national and local level. At the same time, by the end of the period some degree of homogeneity appeared to have been achieved, largely through the World Health Organisation (WHO) expert committees on drugs, alcohol and tobacco.

The long view of addiction concepts in Austria, Italy, Poland and the UK therefore has much to add to current debates. By understanding the history of such concepts, and how and why they came into and out of use, we can better understand the changes in addiction terminology and substance use policy today.

## READ MORE

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